The Living in Artworks in Sociocultural and Historical Contexts

An Introduction

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In the 1980s, Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) claimed "that the Planet earth has AIDS." The expanding tropical forest clearances resemble the loss of hair associated with Kaposi's sarcoma, growing megacities resemble of its manifestations on the human skin. *Homo sapiens* have been inhabiting the planet since 300,000 years, but have only recently had explosive population growth and developed skills which have become destructive for its host, the earth. *Homo sapiens* is the virus; our way of "consuming the world is a self-depleting disease." (Rosenthal 2022, quoting Ginsberg) By now, we may add that the earth's multiple diseases are weakening its immune system to the extent that experts are apprehending ecological tipping points – e.g. the collapse of the Gulf Stream – which would change the global climate and eco systems irreversibly. Ginsberg's literary metaphor is an early inversion of the anthropocentric perspective which has shaped our worldviews (much of it of "western" origin) at least since the early modern period. And, yet, the American poet had used such metaphors already in 1968, when Paul Carroll interviewed him for Playboy Magazine: the "desensitization […] closing in on human consciousness for centuries now [has led] to complete disregard of the sensitive skin of the earth […]. It's an ecological cancer. We're polluting more and more of the world's freshwater resources […]. Oceans are getting hotter and dirtier on account of all the atomic and DDT waste we're pouring into them; it […] will alter the entire heat balance of ocean and land,

[…] and generate enough heat to melt the polar icecaps, causing a worldwide flood […]" (Ginsberg 2001: 192–193).[1] In claiming the earth suffered of an ecological cancer, Ginsberg suggested that certain cells of the earth – which he saw as an organism – had mutated out of control, threatening the body as a whole. Even if some of the causalities of ecologic disaster Ginsberg described have been long dismissed[2], his diagnosis remains impressive, and if only for being so early: years before the seminal Club of Rome report "Limits of Growth" (1972), before the nuclear accident at Three Mile Island (1979) and the catastrophe at Chernobyl (1986), before the chemical gas disasters at Seveso (1976) and Bhopal (1984) etc.

With his more recent AIDS metaphor, Ginsberg did not refer to cancerous cells of the earth, but to its inhabitant *Homo sapiens* becoming a pathogen – a far more radical challenge and inversion of the anthropocentric world view, addressing the Anthropocene before the term was coined. Whether or not western anthropocentrism derives from the biblical narrative of incarnate man being created as the image of god and being endowed as a co-creator of this world (Simkins 2014), this inversion puts him at the very bottom of the hierarchy of all the organisms, and compares him with a virus. Most virologists agree that viruses are not even (micro)organisms, but mere intracellular parasites, at best "organisms at the edge of life" (Rybicki 1990). This is quite a plunge, from once having been considered "the summit of the Creator's work […and …] clearly distinguished […from …] the other creatures" to an equal ranking with tiny beings mostly associated with nasty contagious diseases (Catechism 1993: 343).

In the context of this essay collection it is remarkable that this radical critique of an entirely anthropocentric "money-property-power"-driven economy (Ginsberg 2001: 191) was not uttered by someone from the spheres of politics or sciences, but came from the queer "onetime angry

1 Also see https://www.playboy.com/read/the-playboy-interview-with-allen-ginsberg (last accessed 16.03.2024).

2 Oceans are not "getting hotter […] on account of all the atomic and DDT waste we're pouring into them", but on account of CO2 and other greenhouse gas emissions – which does not make atomic and DDT waste less hazardous.

beat poet who's become the joyous leader, guru and elder statesman of the flower people".[3] It was from Ginsberg's aesthetic approach of poetry and performative arts that he resisted the "desensitization" he saw at work. We dare to claim that more sensitized approaches, merging sciences with arts, have always existed. An example can be provided with the Spanish cleric and enlightenment polymath José Celestino Mutis (1732–1808), not only because of our shared interest in his work, but because he had a long-lasting impact on the visual arts and popular culture in Spanish America (Villegas 2011), and has most recently even inspired work in the field of Bio-Art.

In 1783, the physician, mathematician and botanist Mutis was commissioned by the Spanish crown to direct the famous *Expedición botánica del Nuevo Reino de Granada*, meant to explore the geography and in particular the flora and fauna mainly in what is present-day Colombia. During the expedition, he and his team, many of them of Spanish American, some of African and indigenous American backgrounds (González Bueno 2009), developed new techniques of painting the plants before they ended up as dried specimen in the herbarium. In this novel approach, the disciplines of biology and the arts overlapped. During the expedition, which officially covered a period of 25 years, but in reality lasted half a century, more than 60 illustrators produced 7,000 drawings – a complete and coherent testimony of a large scientific project (Villegas 2011: 12; Mutis 1950–2002).

For Mutis, these drawings were much more than mere illustrations, as for him there seems to be no rupture between the scientific and artistic approaches, to the point where it seems more appropriate to speak of a unity, rather than a complementarity, between fields which, both as a whole and in the isolated elements of his work, completely erased the boundaries separating them (Velasco 2024). When on his own expedition in America, the young Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859) modified his travel schedule solely in order to meet the Spanish scientist in

3 The quote is from the opening question of the interviewer Lewis Carroll. Also see https://www.playboy.com/read/the-playboy-interview-with-allen-ginsberg (last accessed 16.03.2024).

Santa Fe de Bogotá in 1801, and expressed his great admiration for the visual work resulting from his research. Mutis offered him a hundred of these vividly colourised drawings, which on his return to Europe, Humboldt presented to the French Academy in order to gain admission as a member of this institution. Most likely inspired by his senior Spanish colleague, Humboldt developed theoretical concepts quite similar to those put into practise by Mutis, associating art and science in new forms of inquiry.

Mutis' work fuelled our interest in finding further examples transcending the boundaries between these two spheres, empathising with the living in general, including non-European cosmologies and transdisciplinary approaches. This gave rise first to an international workshop on the use of the living in art, in 2021, and then to this book. This choice proved particularly rich, opening the way to reflections and debates on fundamental issues – in connection with the question of the Anthropocene, as we have seen above, but more specifically in the field of art. We would now like to consider three of the many questions raised by this approach.

The first relates to the epistemology of art, and concerns its nature and origin. The enlightenment philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) saw art and nature as opposed (Kant 1987: 170)[4], while the paleoanthropologist André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–1986) attributed the first artistic manifestations, which for him were indissociable from religion, to the *Homo sapiens* (Leroi-Gourhan 1976: 34). In both cases, art is explicitly considered as a characteristic exclusively of humanity. Thus, the debate on the human nature of art is not new, and Concepción Cortés Zulueta's text provides elements for reopening it, based on the Bowerbird case, while Francesco Di Maio offers a theoretical framework based on positions of the German philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling (1775–1854).

In *Bowerbirds and Their Bowers*, Cortés Zulueta presents the creative work of the males belonging to this group of birds in a process of

4 "Art is distinguished from nature […]. For though we like to call the product that bees make (the regularly constructed honeycombs) a work of art, we do so only by virtue of an analogy with art".

courtship, in which they elaborate veritable bridal chambers. The author emphasizes the possibility of 'artistic taste' in bowerbirds, and even of aesthetic criticism in the females. This ability would not be innate, but learned or formed through practice (even cultural practice), thus bringing new elements to the discussion of the role of learning in the formation of taste.

For his part, Di Maio's essay on *Animal Architecture in Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling's Philosophy of Art* shows how the philosopher dissociated art from the mating rituals of non-humans, understanding it as an activity that goes far beyond this, and in many cases even opposes it. The author returns at length to Schelling's cosmology, where "[a]rt is therefore not what distinguishes humans from other animals, but rather what they have in common." (Di Maio, in this volume) In his view, all beings, including inanimate ones, are, consciously or unconsciously, artists.

These two texts place us directly within the current issues of the Anthropocene, the place of the human in the universe and the boundaries between humans and non-humans. It is even hard to tell whether Schelling's position or the example of the bowerbirds are in contradiction with the theories of Kant or Leroi-Gourhan, because they are based on fundamentally different understandings of being, of beings, and of art. Indeed, it is the very notion of art itself that must be first defined. From the study of the living in the history of art, the hypothesis that emerges and that we endorse is that, far beyond the material or immaterial products of creativity, art is rather a constructed, evolutive concept for which each culture, or even each social group, redefines its sense, limits and meaning.

The question takes on a new meaning today when, in addition to the creations of the non-human living, we are confronted with those made by the non-living: by artificial intelligence of which André Rottmann's text, *On the Ecologies of Contemporary Art*, shows some of the uses of artificial intelligence in interaction with the living made by artists. But, and this is the second question we want to highlight, if art is an evolving and changing concept that each society or group appropriates and redefines, who decides on the evolution, meaning and limits of art within these ensembles?

The question of the use of the living in art takes a new turn here. The texts by Jérôme Thomas, *Body Ornamentation in Pre-Columbian America*, and by Sébastien Galliot, Sandra Revolon and Anne Di Piazza, *The Snake and the Flying Fox*, present art first and foremost as a manifestation of belonging to a social group and, inscribed on the body itself, as an indication of the individual's position inside that group. Thomas also points to the radically different value of practices such as cranial and dental deformities, etc., which for pre-Hispanic peoples anchored the wearer in a global cosmogony (as in Schelling), while in the eyes of the conquering Spaniards, these practises deprived them of a claim to humanity. The text by Galliot, Revolon and Di Piazza, for its part, places the emphasis on the processes of body ornamentation which, in many cases, count for more than the results, and which involve, even more than the initiate's body, his family and wider social group.

These two examples make explicit the theories of the sociology of art and, in particular, of Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), for whom art constitutes a sign of social *Distinction* that taste, formed by implicit learning and not perceived as such (to be related to the text by Cortés Zulueta), makes it possible to internalize, thus transmitting to the individual the codes of the group to which he belongs, without him being aware of it (Bourdieu 1984: 260–281). Nevertheless, such groups and individuals, even when they occupy dominant positions in the society to which they belong, are rarely in a position to modify *Les règles de l'art*. The evolution of art takes place in a more complex way, and is only successful if it is part of an evolution of society as a whole (Bourdieu 1998: 421–424). This means that art is neither completely autonomous, nor entirely dependent, but that it contributes or attempts to provide elements that can accompany and even orient social evolutions.

David Krych's work, *From Beast to Machine*, reveals this process in action. Animal fights, particularly appreciated by certain popular groups and part of the nobility in the 18th century, sought to exalt the "bestiality" of nature. However, these shows evolved over the period studied by Krych and, under pressure from the rising bourgeoisie, tended to become *humanized* by presenting animals not longer as aggressive brutes,

but capable of performing complicated routines and obeying their masters' injunctions.

Despite the suppression of explicit cruelty, and despite the showcasing of their pleasant aspects, suitable even for families, these new spectacles nonetheless exerted a much stronger violence on nature, which, moreover, leaves the mechanism of its process – the training of animals – hidden from its primary audience, which is now the new bourgeois class. This way of "subduing" the "bestiality" of non-humans perfectly integrated and responded to the industrial and capitalist mentality of the 19th century, in which nature was to be entirely subordinated to man in order to achieve productivist aims. It is this same evolution, superficially less cruel (and seemingly more respectful of the living world), which is at the origin of the ecological catastrophe we are living through today, in the Anthropocene. And art, taking on a more *human* appearance, has both followed and encouraged it.

Art therefore has its own share of responsibility in the ecological drama we are living today. This is the last aspect that this introduction aims to emphasize. Bio-Art, though a young art form, has already made fundamental changes to its very nature. Born in the 1990s, it deliberately embraced and sparked controversy, e.g. by Eduardo Kac with his famous fluorescent GFP rabbit, allegedly created by gene manipulation to warn us, according to the artists who practised it at this time, against the dangers of the new bio technology.[5] Protagonists of Bio-Art shared such taste for polemics with the whole of art, which at around the turn of the 21st century began to thrive on provocation as a means to attain publicity and also addressing a wider public – and which soon became one of the preferred instruments of populism. It was only later, with the acceleration of climate change, awareness of the imminent mass extinction of species, pandemics, etc., that Bio-Art, or rather bio-artists acquired a new sense and sensitivity and developed expressions more in line with the related concerns of wide portions of contemporary society. In

5 According to INRA, the French Institute for Agronomic and Animal Research, the rabbit was never developed there by or for the artist – which is what Eduardo Kac had claimed (Launet 2011: 103–105).

response, the discourse of the new bio-artists evolved, and their works assumed, according to them, a predominantly pedagogical objective: to make the public aware of the urgency to change their behavior in order to curb the ecological catastrophe caused, mostly, by productivism and consumerism.

In his essay *Opera Aperta*, Umberto Eco (1932–2016) points out the necessity for art to remain polysemous so as not to become a mere propaganda tool (Eco 1997: 167–177). This principle concurs with Sergio Dalla Bernardina, who points out in his contribution, *The Place of Martyrs*, that the viewer has the right, if not the duty, to be critical. He does so in examining not the living in art, but the dead: hunting trophies and other corpses of animals (including humans) which are increasingly on display in private and public spheres. These recent uses, some for merely decorative purposes, are contrasted with ancient perceptions of the dead body as something sacred – and therefore not dead. The author stresses the importance of questioning both the creations and the discourses that accompany them, which must be verified, first and foremost, in the works themselves. The artwork, including in the context of the Anthropocene and its dramatic consequences, should therefore not be reduced to the artist's educative intentions. Especially since it is almost impossible today not to be aware of the crisis we are living through, and that the effects of changes in our behaviour are often thwarted by the short-term, and often very short-term, interests of dominant groups, adding to the ecological crisis an equally profound democratic crisis which leaves many citizens with a bitter taste of powerlessness.

In her contribution on *Crosscutting Arts, Sciences and Technologies*, Emeline Gougeon introduces the reader to works of bio-artists rendering audible and visible the hidden: the sounds of whales, the effects of marine noise pollution on plankton, the circulation of chemical information between trees and fungal colonies in the soil. It is about (re)sensitizing, and about its impulses for a more circumspect environmental ethics. This is echoed by the text from Regine Rapp and Christian de Lutz, *How Artists Hack Laboratories and Alter the Futures of Science*, indicating some of the directions taken by bio-artists, in particular, by questioning science and its methodology. Many of the artists presented by Gougeon, Rapp and

de Lutz are employing microorganism (fungi, bacteria etc.) or plankton in their work, others are investigating the prospering of fungi and bacteria on micro-plastic – and, by the way, on latex and silicon sex toys. Quite a few of these organisms are capable of colonizing *Homo sapiens* as their host – which brings us back to Allen Ginsberg's metaphors and inversions. Bio-artists thus render visible a veritable universe beyond human perception, and sensitize to an unsettling aesthetic oscillating between imminence and beauty.

While Regine Rapp and Christian de Lutz emphasize the simultaneous quality of these artists as scientists, André Rottmann's *On the Ecologies of Contemporary Art* shows artists who use technology rather than science to produce hybrid works integrating artificial intelligence, art and the living. These literarily spectacular works deploy considerable amounts of technical, human, economic and energy resources. The western industrial paradigm has always built on replacing human with non-human energy – from draught animals, wind and water to fossil and nuclear power (Vries 2013: 177–183, 199–203). With computer technology, this is now extending to the world of art, taking recourse to data processing centers absorbing increasing portions of electricity.[6] The artworks stand in stark contrast to those presented by Rapp and de Lutz, not – or much less – in terms of the artists' declared intentions or their aims and positioning regarding the living world, ecology and the Anthropocene, but in terms of the artistic paradigms involved and the very notions of art they convey, and even in terms of the audiences they address. These oppositions not only confirm Dalla Bernardina's statements, but also, and above all, demonstrate the relevance of this book's historical approach, which, as mentioned above, provides a comparative framework for our relationship not only with the living world, but also with Art.

6 The total energy consumption of data processing centers worldwide corresponds with the total electric energy consumption of Germany – one of the leading industrial nations. The total energy consumption of such centers in Germany corresponds with the total electric energy consumption of Berlin.

These points are just a few examples that highlight the richness of the texts here assembled. However, separately or compared, they also reveal other equally fundamental aspects of the use of the living in art. It is therefore necessary to point out that, even more than in other collective publications, each text in this book (including this introduction) reflects the position of its author(s) alone, and in no way commits the contributors or editors as a whole. This explanation is essential, given that the aim of this publication is not to establish truths, but rather to open discussions fueled by writings that may, at times, or in certain respects, conflict with one another.

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